

Supporting vibrant and sustainable rural communities through the Rural Community Action Network



Policy Position Paper

Sustainable Communities

Sustainable rural communities require local planning that is responsive to their needs, active community involvement and a system that encourages new business opportunities. This should include the development of new affordable housing along with accessible good quality services, such as transport, education, health, social support and financial access.

Creating sustainable rural communities requires a fresh look at how local people and community groups can jointly tackle future concerns, maintain the viability of their services and help deliver quality of life for all. Sustainable communities have a number of components; balancing and integrating the social, economic and environmental needs of their residents, meeting the requirements of existing and future generations whilst taking into consideration their relationship with other communities, locally, nationally and globally.

There are around 11,000 rural communities across England ranging from small hamlets to large bustling market towns. Their character, local economy and access to local services vary significantly. In countering the isolation from centres of local government and public services, rural people have taken on the challenge of doing more for themselves by providing services, caring for their area and providing mutual support to help those less able to travel.

The Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) is uniquely placed to reach all sections of the community and to empower them to play their part in creating a sustainable future. For

decades ACRE and the RCAN have consistently developed local and national initiatives to support strong rural communities. Using shared knowledge and experience and our links with grass roots community action, we can provide guidance and support to meet the challenges ahead.

ACRE and RCAN have adopted the principles of sustainable development in enabling local rural communities throughout England to improve their quality of life. Local rural action generally works through more holistic small-scale projects that combine social, economic and environmental outcomes. RCAN members are exclusively placed to bring together at a local level, all those working to revitalise rural England, particularly in those areas facing the need to adapt to changing circumstances. Whether the cause is the decline in rural industry or the growth in housing for future generations, the way local people respond to changing needs is often the key to generating successful communities. Unless we take action now, we face a future that is less certain and less secure. We need to do this, not just because it's the right thing to do, but because it's in the long term interests of all communities.

ACRE's rural vision

Our vision is that rural communities will increasingly take a leading role in ensuring the social, environmental and economic well-being of all their residents. They will do this in a way that provides for the present generation and also plans for future needs and future challenges. RCAN members will be there to stimulate their thinking, support their work and help turn their aspirations into reality.



Issue

planning policy often rules out new development in smaller rural communities because they are deemed unsustainable

Interpretation of current planning policy invariably means that a narrow view is often taken when assessing what makes a settlement sustainable; for example does it have a school or a shop. These narrow criteria can determine if new housing or other types of development are permitted and can prevent small rural settlements growing sustainably. It will inevitably lead to people within the community moving away (to find housing or work) and the very nature of the village declining.

Solution Support for local communities to deliver sustainability for themselves

With many small to medium sized villages seeing the traditional measures of a sustainable community such as bus services, schools and village shops declining, there is a need to adopt a more sophisticated approach, reflecting what really make communities 'tick' – voluntary car schemes, community owned shops and local support schemes.

In 2008, RCAN member Community Lincs published a research paper and toolkit, *Assessing Rural Sustainability*, looking at the 'real' sustainability of rural communities. It echoed Matthew Taylor's report, *A Living Working Countryside*, which emphasised the need to not look at whether villages are currently sustainable but what we can do to make them more sustainable. Community Lincs hopes that its toolkit will be used by planners across Lincolnshire to assess the real sustainability of communities that historically may have been deemed unsustainable because of their lack of traditional infrastructure.

Stubton in Lincolnshire is an example of where the self-help approach to sustainability in a small village works well. It has no post office, village shop,

pub, or school and just one bus a day to the nearby town of Newark. Stubton is considered by the local authority to be 'unsustainable' in planning terms, meaning that development within the village has virtually ceased. However, it has a church, a village hall, and thriving community spirit, including its Good Neighbour Scheme. Considering these attributes as part of the sustainability of the community is a step change towards substituting the traditional measures of sustainability currently employed by planning authorities. Clearly villages like Stubton can support new development.

There has been similar work in Devon steered by a partnership including the South West ACRE Network. Involving RCAN member, the Community Council of Devon, the *Devon Toolkit for Sustainable Rural Communities*, published in 2008, uses eight assessment characteristics such as; 'Active, with a strong sense of community', 'Well connected' and 'Thriving with a successful local economy'. It aims to help users of the toolkit reach an informed judgement of the current sustainability of Devon's rural towns and villages and looks beyond the traditional measures.

Issue

a struggling rural economy and loss of services

The loss of local services is likely to have a long term effect on the sustainability of the local community. If not addressed, rural communities can become dormitory villages, predominantly inhabited by affluent commuters who can afford to travel and buy the services they require away from where they live.

Solution Innovations that stimulate the local economy and service delivery

In rural areas there is an ongoing challenge between the competing demands of providing housing for the community and ensuring business sustainability, and protection for the local environment.

In *Living Working Countryside*, Matthew Taylor, showed the potential for more economic growth in rural areas and set out useful ways to encourage

it. ACRE supports this approach, including encouragement of mixed development, rural enterprise hubs and live/work units, and where feasible, the use of Greenfield land.

RCAN member, Action with Communities in Cumbria has taken an innovative approach to community sustainability and is helping to ensure the longer term viability of a number of villages. The Exchange

at Crosthwaite is a shining example of effective community action in the face of the loss of rural services and is highly replicable. It has developed a new multi-purpose focal point for the village, providing a wide range of services based on what the community wanted. This included a café, local produce market, dry goods store, the sale of books, videos, DVDs and magazines and personal care services.

The Rural Community Council of Essex's project, A prayer, a hymn and a pint of milk, used the surprising venue of the church in Langford, near

Maldon, to open what is believed to be the country's first ever community-run shop inside a church. Langford is similar to many villages in that it has lost a number of its vital amenities. This project highlights how community groups can try to redress the trend of services closing down or moving away. The venture, appropriately named Heavenly Supplies, opened for business in March 2009; with an extensive stock of goods and a new car park, the shop looks set to meet the needs of this small rural community for years to come and could provide inspiration to many other villages that have lost their last shop in recent years.

Issue

an assumption that large-scale changes and policies made by national government, big businesses and local authorities will ensure sustainability

Whilst a degree of central planning is important, it does nevertheless undersell the importance of small-scale changes that everyone can make at a very local level. Local action within communities can deliver real community benefits.

Solution Community Led Planning (CLP)

Local people, including those often marginalized, can be effectively involved in making policies and decisions affecting the future of where they live. Often it is assumed that only large-scale changes and policies made by international organisations, the state and big business, will ensure sustainability. Local community action, through even small-scale change, can make a big difference to people's lives. It plays a far greater role in regeneration initiatives and the creation of sustainable communities than it is currently credited for in general planning circles.

Community Led Plans provide the perfect opportunity for people at a community or neighbourhood level to "think globally, and act locally" to ensure they grow sustainably. The process of Community Led Planning (CLP) that RCAN advocates throughout its work is the tool that can uncover the needs and aspirations of communities and helps plan for a range of community initiatives. CLP is a tried and tested method to help the shaping and sustaining of services, facilities and the local environment in a way that meets the needs of present and future residents, community groups and local businesses. For more detail please see ACRE's Position Paper on Community Led Planning.

RCAN member, Community First, in Wiltshire, supported the village of Kington St Michael to produce a Parish Plan. As part of this consultation exercise a group was set up to research the parish

economy of the village. This activity led to increased awareness of local businesses, regular business breakfasts, a clearing house for local business services and increased community support for local businesses and services.

Volunteers who were members of the parish plan steering group formed a Parish Economy Sub Group to tackle the business and local economy aspects of the plan. They involved the business community in auditing local services. The key benefits have been; more business activity taking place, a thriving network of local small businesses and increased support for the community run village shop and post office ensuring its future sustainability. Clearly a very positive outcome.



About ACRE

Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country. We aim to promote a healthy, vibrant and sustainable rural community sector that is well connected to policy and decision-makers who play a part in delivering this aim. ACRE is nationally recognised for its expertise in ensuring rural community-led solutions are central to public policy debate.

ACRE is a member of:

- Homes & Communities Agency Rural Housing Advisory Group
- Age UK Rural Advisory Group
- Ministerial Task Force on climate change, the environment and sustainable development
- The new national rural coalition, under the chairmanship of Matthew Taylor MP, which aims to take forward his 2008 proposals to government on a Living, Working, Countryside.

Rural Community Action Network (RCAN)

The RCAN comprises 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) at local level, RCC regional groupings and their national arm in ACRE, providing coverage of all rural areas throughout England. RCCs are county-based, independent, local development agencies that, for decades, have been delivering support on the ground to enable rural communities to improve quality of life for all. They act as a strategic voice for rural communities, allowing grassroots issues to be championed and solutions worked out in partnership between statutory, voluntary and private sector providers. Their strength lies in their ability to work within communities in an inclusive and holistic way, helping local people to develop local solutions and identify unmet needs through a unique approach to community-led planning. Alongside this, RCCs provide a trusted local support network for rural community groups, including dedicated expertise in arenas such as transport, housing, the management of community-owned facilities, social enterprise and rural services.

RCAN national coverage, local reach

Members of the RCAN have a long history of supporting communities to find solutions to their needs. We do this by supporting all sections of the community to plan for the future and by developing relevant services that meet the needs of all generations. We do this with a passion for social inclusion, and high standards throughout the network.

Network members:

- Provide genuine reach into rural communities across England, linking national, regional and local policy with community action at the grassroots
- Promote and develop local solutions that benefit the social, environmental and economic well-being of communities
- Act as a focal point for partners across statutory, private and voluntary sectors, working together to benefit rural communities
- Tackle disadvantage by ensuring their work within rural communities reaches out to marginalised groups and encourages the development of local services for those least able to travel.

This document is one of a series covering the following topics, Rural Challenges, Community Led Planning, Climate Change, Rural Community Buildings, Housing, Rural Services, Transport, Sustainable Communities, Social Inclusion, Older People, Children & Young People, Healthcare and Digital Inclusion.



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Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
Somerset Court, Somerset Road, Cirencester,
Gloucestershire GL7 1TW
(tel) +44 (0)1285 653477
acre@acre.org.uk www.acre.org.uk

Company Limited by Guarantee 3336101 Registered Charity No. 1061568

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